

# Does social status affect generosity?

July 21 2016, by Andy Henion , Nicholas Hays

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Credit: Michigan State University

High-ranking people don't always turn out to be selfish jerks. It all depends on whether they feel worthy of their prominent social position, new research indicates.

A series of six scientific studies led by Michigan State University scholar Nicholas Hays found that people with high social status who didn't believe they earned that status were much more generous than high-

status people who felt they deserved the respect and admiration of others.

Prominent people who don't feel their status is fair and equitable become more generous with others to alleviate that sense of inequity, he explained.

"The effects of social status on generosity are contingent on deservingness, meaning that high-ranking people don't always behave selfishly, as a significant amount of research suggests, but do indeed care about whether or not they deserve their position," said Hays, assistant professor of management.

The findings are published online in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, which is owned by the American Psychological Association.

In separate studies with more than 1,200 total participants, Hays and Steven Blader, professor at New York University, examined the effects of social status on generosity. In one of the studies, for example, they surveyed 255 MBA students organized into 51 teams twice during a six-month project on the students' willingness to help their teammates and on their perceptions of their own and their teammates' social status.

The research project is one of the first of its kind. Previous studies have looked at the effects of power - which is defined as control over resources, whereas status is about being respected by others - and found that powerful people tend to become more selfish regardless of fairness or equity.

But Hays and Blader, in all six studies, found that while high-status people who felt worthy of their rank were indeed less generous, high-status people who felt unworthy were actually more generous.

Prior research has also found that generosity often leads to high [social status](#). The current study takes that a step further by considering what happens after people have attained high status.

"We demonstrate that [generosity](#) may not persist once [people](#) achieve that high status," Hays said. "It depends on whether they feel that status is deserved."

Provided by Michigan State University

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